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## ARABISMS IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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IN the Talmud and Midrashim, fourteen words occur which purport to be Arabic. They are quoted, usually by R. Levi,<sup>1</sup> for the purpose of explaining words of the Bible the meaning of which had become forgotten, or as a basis for a homiletic interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The following is a list of them. For reasons to be afterwards explained, they are divided into two classes.

### Class I

- (1) בערביא קורין לאימרא יובלא
- (2) בערביא קורין לבשרא לחמא
- (3) בערביא קורין למסריקא מסלסלה
- (4) לשון ערבי הוא בערביא קורין לנביא סביא
- (5) בערביא צווחין לביזתא עדיתא
- (6) בערביא קורין לינוקא עיילא
- (7) בערביא קורין לחתירתא עתירתא
- (8) בערביא צווחין לינוקא פתיא
- (9) בערביא קורין לשערא שיטפא
- (10) בערביא צווחין לתרנגולתא שבויא

<sup>1</sup> To R. Levi are ascribed all but Nos. 12 and 13. No. 7 is also quoted as an 'Arabism' by R. Eleazar b. Simeon. Akiba quotes No. 8 as used in כרכי הים, and No. 10 is quoted by Resh Laskish as a word found in the language of קן נשריא.

<sup>2</sup> To the former class belong Nos. 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14; to the latter Nos. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11.

## Class II

(11) בעד לשון ערבי הוא

(12) טייעא [תגרא דערביא] אמר שקול יהבך

(13) ערבי אמר מה את מכסה בי

(14) קבע לשון ערבי הוא

These words raise a perplexing problem. In very few cases can they be referred with confidence to the Arabic; in some cases a resemblance can be detected; but in the majority of instances, the words are Aramaic or altogether unknown.

Two theories have been advanced to explain these facts. Firstly, it is suggested that ערביא does not mean Arabia, but is to be identified with Arrabeh, a Galilean town near Sepphoris.<sup>3</sup> Against this it might be urged that no reason can be assigned why an insignificant town should be specially mentioned for its dialect, and not the country or district in which it is situated.<sup>4</sup> Further, how, on this theory, are the genuine Arabic words to be accounted for? The second theory is that the language referred to is a dialect of Arabic which contained a large admixture of Aramaic.<sup>5</sup> If this were correct, we see from the instances preserved for us in rabbinical literature that the predominance of Aramaic in this dialect over Arabic was truly remarkable.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Brüll, *Fremdsprachliche Redensarten* (Leipzig 1869), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Thus the Galilean dialect is mentioned in Gen. r., ch. 26, § 7. Bacher declares, "Wir hören nicht dass er [R. Levi] ausserhalb des heiligen Landes sich aufgehalten hätte," *Agada der pal. Amoräer*, II, 303. It is nowhere expressly stated that he traveled to Arabia. But his knowledge of Arabian customs (see Lam. r., Proem. 23, ed. Buber, p. 20; Eccles. r. on 12, 8, and Tanḥuma, וישלח, § 11) leads one to suppose that he had journeyed to that country.

<sup>5</sup> So Brüll, *l. c.*, p. 40; Kohut, *Aruch*, s. v. סך (p. 48); Bacher, *l. c.*

Would it not, therefore, be more probable to suppose that there was an Aramaic-speaking colony settled in Arabia? Modern discoveries have shown us how widely spread was the Aramaic language in all parts of the Eastern World. Endorsements on Assyrian and Babylonian contracts, papyri from Egypt, and Aramaic inscriptions from Arabia testify to this in ample manner.<sup>6</sup> The Assuan papyri disclose the existence of a Jewish colony in Egypt using the Aramaic language. There is consequently nothing a priori improbable in the supposition that there was a Jewish colony, settled in Arabia, which preserved the Aramaic tongue of the mother-country. Such a dialect would naturally continue to use many words which had become obsolete elsewhere, since the rate of change in a language is much slower in the provincial districts.<sup>7</sup> It would also incorporate words from the vernacular of the country. These two facts, added to the usual differences of pronunciation to be found in dialects, will account for practically all the 'Arabisms' in the rabbinic literature.

One important indication that the 'Arabisms' are really traces of an Aramaic dialect spoken in Arabia has hitherto escaped notice. There is a marked difference in the phraseology which contains an 'Arabism' and that which contains a reference to another language. In Class I we have uniformly בערביא קורין "In Arabia they call, etc."<sup>8</sup> This need not necessarily mean that the word which follows is Arabic. When, for instance, the Talmud declares בבבל קורין לינוקא רביא (Sukkah 5*b*, Hāgigah 13*b*), we do not infer

<sup>6</sup> See Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*, II, 200 ff., and Cooke, *North Semitic Inscriptions*, pp. 195 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Comp. e. g. the French spoken by Canadian colonists with that of France.

<sup>8</sup> The only exception is No. 4, which will be discussed below.

that רביא is a genuine Babylonian word. The statement merely means that, whereas ינוקא was used in Palestinian Aramaic, רביא was usual in Babylonian Aramaic. In similar manner בערביא קורין לאימרא יובלא may only mean that יובלא was the word employed for 'lamb' by the Aramaic-speaking Jews of Arabia.<sup>9</sup>

Further, despite the fact that the rabbinic literature contains over twenty references to the Greek language, we do not once find the formula ביון קורין "In Greece, they call, etc." Instead we meet with such expressions as:

(Gen. r., ch. 81, § 5) אלון לשון יונית הוא

(Gen. r., ch. 40, § 4) אפס לשון יוני הוא

(Shabbat 63b) בלשון יוני קורין לכלב למס

(Tanḥuma, צו) לשון אלנסטי קטנא שאול

(Abodah zarah 24b) קרו פרסאי לספרא דביר

(Abodah zarah 24b) קרו פרסאי לנדה דשתנא

In all these instances, the phraseology indicates beyond doubt that a Greek or Persian word is intended. These are to be compared with some of the Arabisms contained in Class II, but are quite distinct from those enumerated in Class I.

Hence, with few exceptions, the 'Arabisms' in the rabbinic literature presuppose the settlement of a colony of Jews<sup>10</sup> in Arabia, where Aramaic continued to hold its own against the vernacular. That the migration took place

<sup>9</sup> Contrast the two statements אמר ר' עקיבא כשהלכתי לאפריקי היו קורין למעה קשיטה (Rosh ha-shanah 26a) and אמר ר' עקיבא טט בכחפי שתים פת באפריקי שתים (Sanhedrin 4b). In the former case a Hebrew word used by African Jews is clearly intended, in the latter a native word.

<sup>10</sup> That they were Jews is evidenced by the presence of Hebrew words in Aramaic form.

at an early date, long before the commencement of the current era, may be inferred from the presence of words which had passed out of use in Palestinian and Babylonian Aramaic. Especially interesting is the apparent survival in Aramaic form of Hebrew words which had become obsolete, **יובלא**, **מסלסלה**, **עוילא**, and **פחיא**.

The following is a detailed discussion of the words:

### Class I

#### **יובלא** (1)

(p. Berakot 9, 1 end) **אמר רבי לוי בערביא קורין לאימרא יובלא** "R. Levi said, In Arabia they call a lamb *ḡōblā*." Quoted to explain **במשוך היובל** (Josh. 6, 5). **מאי משמע** **דהאי יובלא** **לישנא דרכרא** **הוא ? דתניא** **אמר ר' עקיבא** **כשהלכתי** **לערביא** **היו קורין לדכרא יובלא** "How do we know that the word *ḡōblā* is an expression for 'lamb'? For it has been taught in a Baraita, R. Akiba says, when I went to Arabia, they were calling a 'lamb' *ḡōblā*" (Rosh ha-shanah 26a). Kohut refers to *ḡābilat(un)* which is sometimes used in the sense of 'lambs,' but more commonly of 'camels.' But the word is obviously the Hebrew **יובל**. We here meet it among an Aramaic-speaking colony in Arabia, just as it has been discovered on an inscription belonging probably to Carthage, which has been unearthed at Marseilles (see Cooke, *North Semitic Inscriptions*, p. 112). The Targum only uses the word in the meaning of 'Jubilee' (see Levy, *Chald. Wörterb.*, I, 325). In Syriac, the meaning 'lamb' is not found, but in the Syrohexaplar **יובל** is used for **היובלים** in Josh. 6, 4; but that merely represents Greek *ωβηλ* (i. e. Hebrew **יובל** in transliteration) which Origen took over from Aquila.

## לחמא (2)

ולחומם כגללים, שנהרנו והיה בשרם מושלך כגללים הללו, א"ר לוי  
 "And their flesh as dung" (Zeph. I. 17): because they were slain, and their  
 flesh was cast upon the ground like dung. R. Levi said, In Arabia they call 'flesh' *lahmā*" (Exod. r.,  
 ch. 42, § 4). The explanation here given of לחום agrees  
 with the LXX *καὶ τὰς σαρκας αὐτῶν*. לחם is not found in  
 Aramaic in the sense of 'flesh.' Here it is to be explained  
 as a loan-word from Arabic, or rather a loan-signification.  
 It is not strange that a colony speaking the Aramaic lan-  
 guage in Arabia should have adopted that signification,  
 especially as *lahm* and לחם frequently denote 'food' gen-  
 erally. Comp. לחם אשה Lev. 3, 11-16, where the *flesh* of  
 the burnt-offering is intended.

## מסלסלה (3)

סלה כל אבירי ה' (Lam. I, 15), וי"מ סלה כמו סרקון, א"ר לוי  
 בערביא קורין למסריקא מסלסלה "There are some who ex-  
 plain *sillā* to mean 'comb.' R. Levi said, In Arabia  
 they call a 'comb' *mesalselā*" (Midrash, *ad loc.*). In  
 Arabic *salla* means 'to extract,' and there is no trace  
 of the meaning 'to comb.' We find *musalsal(un)*  
 'a piece of cloth figured with stripes or lines' and  
*mutasalsil(un)* 'a piece of cloth woven badly' (Lane,  
 p. 1398), which are probably borrowed from Aramaic  
 (Fränkel, *Fremdwörter*, p. 76). Comp. Gittin 59a where  
 סלסלה is used for a linen garment. The explanation of  
 מסלסלה is to be found in the Hebrew סלסל 'to curl the  
 hair' Nazir I, I (comp. 3a). The following passage from  
 Rosh ha-shanah 26a is instructive: לא הוו ידעי רבנן מאי סלסלה  
 ותרוממך, יומא חד שמעוה לאמתא דבי רבי דהוות אמרה לההוא גברא  
 דהוה קמהפך בשעריה, אמרה ליה עד מתי אתה מסלסל בשערך

"The Rabbis did not know the meaning of סלסלה in Prov. 4, 8. One day they heard the maid in Rabbi's house saying to someone who was combing (curling) his hair, 'How long wilt thou מסלסל thy hair?' " The fact that the Rabbis were ignorant of its meaning shows that the word was obsolete and only used in the country villages, from one of which the maid possibly came. It is consequently interesting to find the word survive among the Jews of Arabia.

#### סביא (4)

אבי שוכו, שהיה אביהן של נביאים שסוכים ברוח הקודש, רבי לוי אמר (Lev. r., ch. i, § 3) לשון ערבי הוא בערבי קורין לנביא סביא "The father of Soco' (I Chron. 4, 18); (so called) because he was the father of prophets who *look* (into the future) through the aid of the Holy Spirit. R. Levi said, It is an Arabic expression; in Arabia they call a 'prophet' *sākīā*." There is no such root in Arabic. In Syriac we have *sakkī* 'to look out for, await'; and in Jewish Aramaic the root is very common in the sense of 'to look.' The use of the word in Aramaic for 'prophet' is paralleled by שמואל סבואה (I Chron. 26, 28) and נר סבואה (*ibid.*, 29, 29), see Levy, *Chald. Wörterb.*, II, 162. Comp. the use of חזה, רואה, and צופה in the Bible. The presence of the words לשון ערבי הוא, as already indicated, presents a grave difficulty to our theory. It should, however, be noticed that the formula לשון פ' הוא בפ' קורין occurs nowhere else in the Midrashim. Unfortunately there are no parallel passages to aid us; but possibly the original version read simply רבי לוי אמר בערביא קורין.

#### עדיתא (5)

מה אעידך מה אדמה לך, ר' יונתן אמר כמה ביזות נתתי לכם . . . .  
א"ר לוי בערביא צווחין לביזתא עדיתא (Midrash to Lam. 2, 13)



"R. Jonathan explains אַעֲדִיר as "How many spoils have I given thee." R. Levi said, In Arabia they call 'spoil' *'adītā*." The lexicographers refer the word to *'adāyat(un)* which, however, means 'enmity,' not 'spoil.' Nearer to hand are the biblical עַר 'prey,' and the Targumic עֲדִיתָא Prov. 16, 19 and עַרִי Isai. 33, 23, etc.

#### עוֹלָא (6)

(Gen. r., ch. 36, § 1, Lev. r., ch. 5, § 1) "They send forth their little ones like a flock" (Job 21, 11): *'ayil* means 'young.' R. Levi said, In Arabia they call a 'child' *'ayilā*." Although one naturally thinks of *'yāl(un)* and *'ayil(un)*, it is doubtful whether we have here a true Arabism. For the Arabic word means 'the persons fed,' and can refer equally well to a wife or a slave; it signifies 'family' rather than 'children' (see Lane). The root is, of course, different from עוּל 'to suckle' which is found in Hebrew and Syriac, for that corresponds to the Arabic *gāla*. The word עוֹלָא I take to be a survival in Aramaic of the Hebrew עוֹל which occurs in Job 19, 18 (where the Targum has יִנְקִיא) and 21, 11.

#### עֲתִירְתָא (7)

וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ ה', רַבִּי לֹא אָמַר מִשָּׁל לְבָן מַלְכִּים שֶׁהָיָה חוֹתֵר עַל אָבִיו לִיטּוֹל לִיטְרָא שֶׁל זֶהב וְהָיָה זֶה חוֹתֵר מִבְּפָנִים זֶה חוֹתֵר מִבְּחוּץ, שֶׁכֵּן בְּעֵרַבִּיא קוֹרִין לַחֲתִירְתָא עֲתִירְתָא (Gen. r., ch. 63, § 5) "And the Lord was intreated (*'tr*) of him' (Gen. 25, 21). R. Levi said, It is like the case of a prince who, with his father, was digging (*htr*) for a pound of gold. One dug from within and the other from without; for in Arabia they call 'digging' *'atirtā*." The following are the variants: אַלְעוֹר בֶּר ר' שְׁמַעוֹן

לחירתא עתירתא (Lev. r., ch. 30 § 3); in the name of R. Levi לחתירה עתירה (Ruth r., ch. 5 on 2, 14); and in the name of R. Eleazar b. Simeon לחתרתה עתרתה (p. Sanhedrin 10, 2). There is no Arabic word resembling this with the meaning 'to dig.' The explanation I offer is this: we have here merely a dialectal difference of pronunciation. The Aramaic-speaking Jews of Arabia pronounced the ח like an ע. We may compare אית אתרא דצווחין לחייבא עייבא (Lam. r. on 2, 1), בגלילא צווחין לחויא אויא (Gen. r., ch. 26, § 7), and עכנא 'adder' with חכינא.

#### (8) פתיא

וארא בפתאים, אלו השבטים, אמר ר' לוי בערביא צווחין לינוקא פתיא (Gen. r., ch. 87, § 1) "'And I beheld among the simple ones' (Prov. 7, 7); these are the tribes [the *children* of Israel]. R. Levi said, In Arabia they call a 'child' *patīā*." פתי יאמין לכל דבר, מהו פתי נער שכן בערביא קורין לנער פתי (Exod. r., ch. 3, § 1) "'The simple believeth every word' (Prov. 14, 15); how know we that *peti* means a 'child'? Since in Arabia they call a 'child' *peti*." Elsewhere it is stated in the name of R. Akiba, לינוקא פתיא (Sanhedrin 110b).<sup>11</sup> The word is usually identified with *fata(n)* 'a youth' or *fatiṇ(un)* 'youthful.' It is, however, possible that the Hebrew פתי translated 'simple' also means 'youthful.' In the first passage quoted from the Book of Proverbs the parallel word is בנים, and the LXX

<sup>11</sup> By כרכי הים is meant Asia Minor, the dialect of which is mentioned several times. In two cases genuine Arabic words are quoted as being used there, probably loan-words. "There is a precious stone in Asia Minor, called דרה שמה" (Megillah 12a), which is clearly *durrat(un)* 'pearl'; and "עוף אחד יש בכרכי הים וקיק שמו" (Shabbat 21a), which is probably to be identified with *kāḳ(un)* 'crow, raven' (Dozy, *Supplément*, II, 420).

render *רחב*. The root-meaning is 'to be spacious,' and as applied to the intellect 'open-minded, simple.' The word was then referred, as in Arabic, to the 'young' who are simple in mind; and, as pointed out above, there are passages in the Old Testament where the rendering 'youthful' would be quite suitable for פתי. Therefore it is not improbable that in our word פתיה is to be traced the Hebrew פתי.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, I notice that Payne Smith (col. 3333) gives פתו ילדיה 'multiplicatae sunt proles ejus'; and it is just possible that פתיה was used in Aramaic for 'increase, progeny.'

#### (9) שיטפא

מי פלג לשטף תעלה, אמר ר' יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי בערביא קורין "לשער שיטפא" "Who hath cleft a channel for each hair [*sic*; Eng. vers. *the waterflood*]?" (Job 38, 25). R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi, In Arabia they call 'hair' *šitfā* (Tanḥuma, Tazri'a, § 8).

אמר רבי ברכיה אית אחרין דצווחין לשערא שיטפא (Lev. r., ch. 15, § 3) "Rabbi Berechiah said, There are places where people call 'hair' *šitfā*."

This explanation of שטף is based on a passage in the Talmud (Baba batra 16a), where יהוה את איוב מן הסערה is taken to mean "And God answered Job by the example of the *hair*." הרבה נימין בראתי באדם וכל נימא ונימא "Numerous hairs have I created in a man; but for each hair have I created a separate follicle (from which it has growth)." This word שיטפא 'hair' is otherwise unknown. Kohut conjectures a connection with Arabic *sbt*, with transposition of letters. But *sabit(un)*

<sup>12</sup> It is not denied that פתיה and *fata(n)* are the same word. This, however, does not necessarily imply borrowing, since they occur in kindred languages.

means 'lank,' and its connection with 'hair' is limited to the phrase *sabītu-š-ša'ri* 'a man having lank hair.' More probably the word is to be referred to the Hebrew and Aramaic root שטף 'to overflow,' it being descriptive of 'flowing' locks. We might, perhaps, compare שַׁעֲרָה 'storm' and שַׁעַר 'hair,' lit. that which is tossed about by the wind. It is true the Oxford Lexicon distinguishes the roots, but the Assyrian *šārtu* 'hairy skin' and *šāru* 'wind' (Delitzsch. *Assyr. Handwb.*, p. 635) seem to be in favor of a common root. The Arabic *ša'r(un)* 'hair' is to be considered a loan-word.

#### שְׁכִיבָא (10)

או מי נתן לשכּוּי בינה, הִיא תִרְנְנֹולֶתָא, א"ר לוי בערביא צווחין לתִרְנְנֹולֶתָא שְׁכִיבָא "Or who hath given understanding to the *sekuā* (Job 38, 36)?" That is, the cock. R. Levi said, In Arabia they call the cock *sekuēā* (Lev. r., ch. 25, § 5).

In p. Berakot 9, 1, near end, the reading is בְּרומי צווחין לשְׁכִיבָא "In Rome (?) they call, etc." And elsewhere it is stated, לקיש כשהלכתי לתחום קן נשריא (Rosh ha-shanah 26a). Only in rabbinic writings is שְׁכִיבָא found in the sense of 'cock,' and it seems to have been in use in certain provincial dialects. Here we find it in an Aramaized form.

#### Class II

##### מִבְעַד (11)

מִבְעַד לְצַמְתָּךְ, א"ר לוי לשון ערבי הוא, אין בעי ליה מימרא ארוח לי הוא "Behind (*mibba'ad*) thy veil" (Cant. 4, 1): R. Levi said, It is Arabic. If one wishes to say 'make room for me,' he says 'מִבְעַד for me.'" (Midrash, *ad loc.*) R. Levi would render the passage in Canticles "take

away, remove thy veil." The reference is, of course, to Arabic *b'd*.

(12) יהב

לא הוּו ירעי רבנן מאי השלך על ה' יהבך, אמר רבה בר בר חנה יומא חר הוה אוילנא בהדי ההוא טייעא הוה דרינא טונא ואמר לי שקול "The Rabbis did not know the meaning of 'cast upon the Lord thy *ḡehāb*' (Ps. 55, 23). Said Rabba bar bar Ḥana, One day I was journeying together with an Arab, and I was carrying a load. And he said to me 'take thy *ḡehāb* and cast it upon my camel" (Rosh ha-shanah 26b).

The reference is to *yahb(un)*. Since the word טייעא is used for 'Arab,' it might signify one of the Southern Arabs, who said *ḡahb* instead of *yahb*.

ר' חייא רבה ור' שמעון בר ר' ור' שמעון בר חלפתא שכחו מילין מן התרגום ואתון להרא תנרא דערביא למלפיניה מן תמן, שמע קליה דאמר לחבריה תלי הדין יהבא עלי, שמעון מיניה יהבא משוי "R. Ḥiyya the Elder, R. Simeon b. Rabbi, and R. Simeon b. Ḥalafta forgot the meaning of certain words of the Targum and went to a merchant from Arabia to learn it from him. They heard him say to somebody, 'Place this *ḡahbā* upon me'; whence they learnt that *ḡahbā* means 'burden'" (Gen. r., ch. 79, § 7).

The merchant who is mentioned need not necessarily have been an Arab. Possibly he was a Jewish merchant from Arabia. Note that in the continuation, it is שמע קליה דערבי.

(13) כס

ועוד שמע קליה דערבי דאמר לחבריה מה את מכסה בי והיה רוצה לומר "They further heard an Arab say to someone 'why dost thou *mekasse* me?' He

meant to say 'why dost thou crush (*me'asse*) me?' As it is written 'And ye shall tread down ('*ss*) the wicked' " (Mal. 3, 21) (Midrash Gen., *ibid.*).

The word is *kassa* 'to grind,' *maksūs(un)* 'bruised, pounded.' The pronunciation of the כ and ע was somewhat similar. Comp. אית אתרא רצוהין לכיבא עיבא (Lam. r. on 2, 1).

#### קבע (14)

היקבע אדם אלהים, א"ר לוי לשון ערבי הוא. ערבי בא להשיח עם " 'Will a man rob (*ḵb'*) God?' (Mal. 3, 8). R. Levi said, It is Arabic. When an Arab holds conversation with another and wishes to say to him 'Art thou he who defrauds us?' he says to him, 'Art thou our *ḵōbea'?*' " (Tanḥuma, Terumah, § 7). Comp. the following: לוי איקלע להווא אתרא אתא נברא לקמיה, אמר ליה קבען: פלניא, לא הוה ידע מאי קאמר ליה אתא שאיל בי מדרשא אמרו ליה גולן "Levi [b. Sisi] came to a certain place. A man stepped up to him and said to him 'So and so is a *ḵab'an.*' He did not understand what he said. When he went and asked at the school they said, 'It means thief' " (Rosh ha-shanah 2a-b). The Arabic *ḵb'* has quite another signification. I suggest that the word intended here is *ḵbh*, which was either pronounced like *ḵb'* (comp. No. 7), or was used dialectally for it (see Wright, *Comparative Grammar*, p. 48). The reference is perhaps to the common phrase *ḵabaḥahu-llāhu* "God deprived him of the attainment of his desires." R. Levi accordingly explains היקבע אדם אלהים as being the reverse of this —'can a man deprive God of anything' in the same way as He can deprive man?